

Cultural Relativism

- Cultural relativists assert that concepts are socially constructed and vary cross-culturally.
- These concepts may include such fundamental notions as what is considered true, morally correct, and what constitutes knowledge or even reality itself.
- In 'Understanding a Primitive Society' (American Philosophical Quarterly, 1964), Peter Winch argues that our sense of reality is a social construction, based upon the prevailing discourse of a society.
- Thus, cultural relativists reject the rationalist and universal premisses of grand theories such as functionalism, Marxism, or Freudian psychoanalysis.
- Cultural relativism draws upon the tradition of linguistic philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Willard Quine, Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir. These writers have contended that if language constructs the world, then reality is not independently existing, but is shaped by cultural and linguistic categories.
- Two cultures can thus be incommensurable since their world-views are based on quite different languages and premises.
- Paul Feyerabend (in *Against Method*, 1975) says that there are cultures so different from the West that they are incomprehensible to outsiders, who therefore cannot translate them into their own terms.
- More recently, the arguments of post-modernists have also advanced claims of cultural relativism.
- This has major implications for the study of non-Western societies.
- If importing a Western rationalist approach is ethnocentric, then we must understand cultural patterns in their own terms, adopting an insider's view of the culture.
- Ethnography thus becomes a process of uncovering the meanings by which people construct reality and translating this knowledge into the discourse of the field-worker's own society.